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Anime's Surge on Design in Japan and Beyond

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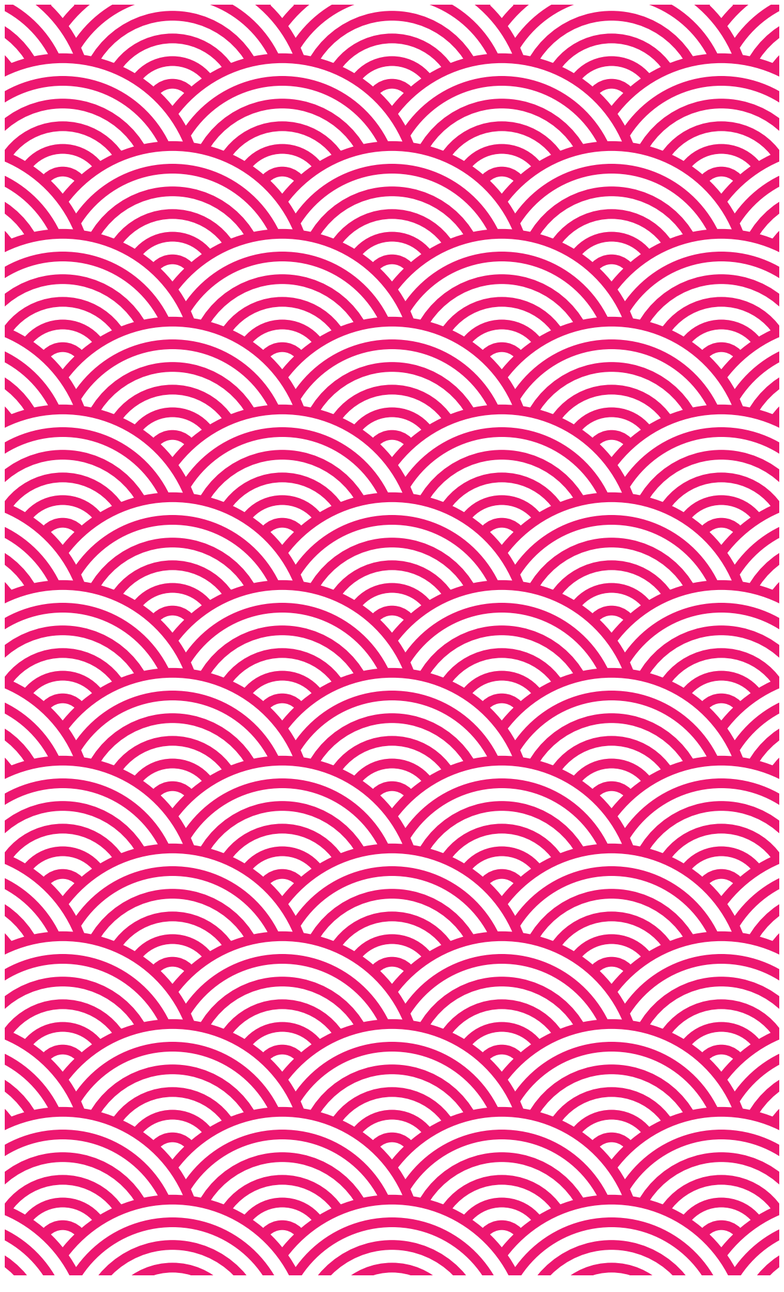


From Tradition to Innovation:
The Transformative Journey of Japanese Design

From traditional art forms like calligraphy and ukiyo-e to the modern digital designs of today, design in Japan has a vibrant history. By blending Western modernism with distinctive regional aesthetics, Japan emerged as a global leader in design innovation during the 20th century. Design became increasingly important in branding, advertising, and popular culture as a result of the post-war economic boom and the emergence of consumer culture.

As one of Japan's most popular cultural exports, anime has greatly influenced contemporary design. Anime's unique visual aesthetic—bright colors, stylized characters, and dynamic compositions—has impacted various design industries, including digital media, packaging, and advertising. Because of its widespread appeal in Japan and abroad, it has developed into a compelling and influential visual language that connects pop culture with design.

As such, this monograph explores the intersection between anime and design, looking at how anime's aesthetics and cultural significance have influenced current Japanese design trends. Through analyzing anime's contribution to the visual identity of modern Japanese design and evaluating its impact on international design practices, this monograph also aims to highlight how anime continues to transform design and offer insights into its cultural and commercial significance.

Exploring the union of tradition and modernity in Japanese design, where the influence of anime shapes both local identity and global trends.

葛飾北斎

Early Influences

The visual culture of Japan has been greatly influenced by traditional Japanese art, especially ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) and calligraphy. For ukiyo-e, artists would create vibrant and highly stylized images by creating a series of carved wooden "stamps" that they would then use to transfer various colored inks onto paper. Ukiyo-e had a significant impact on both Japanese and Western visual arts because of its strong lines, flat color fields, and focus on commonplace scenes. Using methods later influencing European Impressionists, artists such as Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige depicted landscapes, kabuki performers, and bijin-ga (pictures of beautiful women). At the same time, calligraphy influenced the evolution of design aesthetics in Japan by emphasizing the beauty of brush strokes and the fluidity of kanji characters.

"If only Heaven will give me just another ten years... Just another five more years, then I could become a real painter."

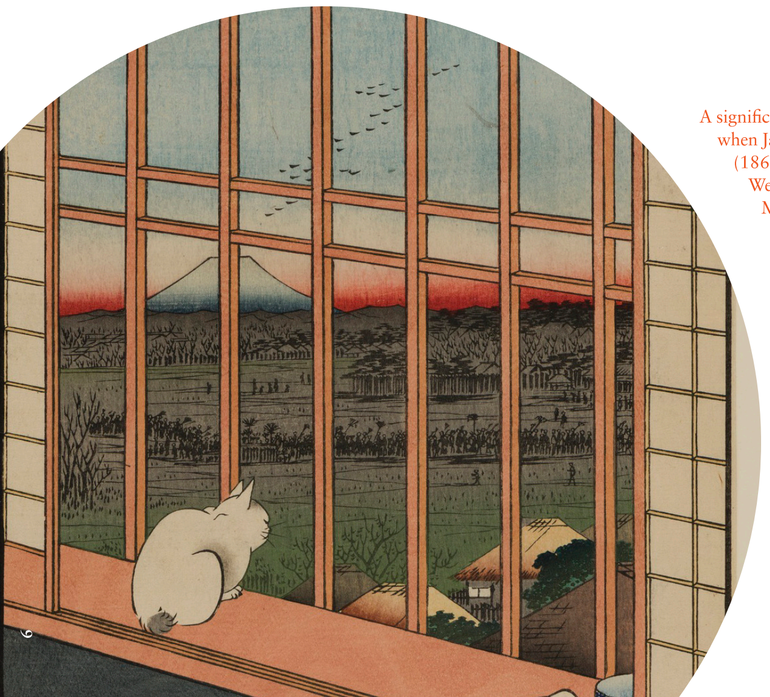
— Hokusai

Under the Wave off Kanagawa
Katsushika Hokusai, 1831

The Birth of Anime

The origins of anime (a Japanese animation style) can be found in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s when Western animation and traditional Japanese art forms influenced early animation experiments. Among the first noteworthy works was Jun'ichi Kōuchi's *Namakura Gatana* (The Dull Sword, 1917), regarded as one of the first commercially released instances of Japanese animation. Western animation studios like Walt Disney Productions and Fleischer Studios were clearly influential during this time (the late 1920s started the "Golden Age" of American animation). Japanese animators took influence but started combining traditional ukiyo-e art forms with contemporary animation methods to create works incorporating distinctive cultural elements, setting them apart from Western animation.

The Dull Sword
Jun'ichi Kōuchi, 1917



A significant change occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when Japan started to open up to the West after the Meiji Restoration (1868). As Japanese traditional practices began to blend with Western art movements like Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and Modernism, hybrid artistic styles were produced. This combination is particularly evident in early Japanese commercial art and advertising design, where Japanese compositions incorporated Western techniques like perspective and shading. The modern design movement and Japan's future as a global leader in design innovation were made possible by the influence of Western design.

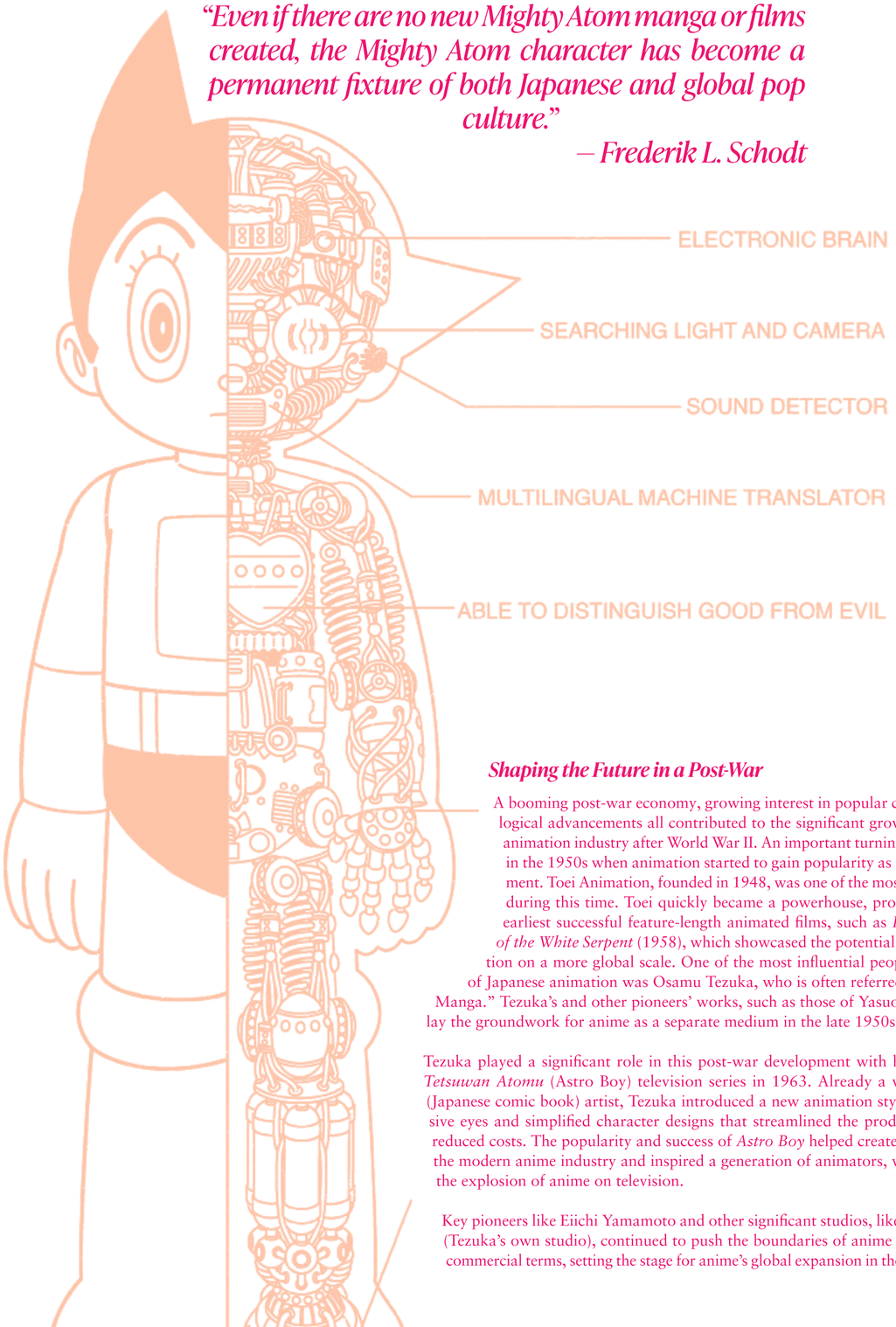
Asakusa Ricefields and Torinomachi Festival, No. 101
Utagawa Hiroshige, 1857

The 1930s saw the development of longer animated features, with *Momotaro: Umi no Shinpei* (Momotaro: Sacred Sailors, 1945) being the first full-length animated feature film made in Japan, even though the majority of early animations were brief, experimental films. These early productions, which combined cinematic techniques with a distinctively Japanese artistic sensibility, set the foundation for the later flourishing anime industry.

Momotaro: Sacred Sailors
Mitsuyo Seo, 1945

"Even if there are no new Mighty Atom manga or films created, the Mighty Atom character has become a permanent fixture of both Japanese and global pop culture."

— Frederik L. Schodt



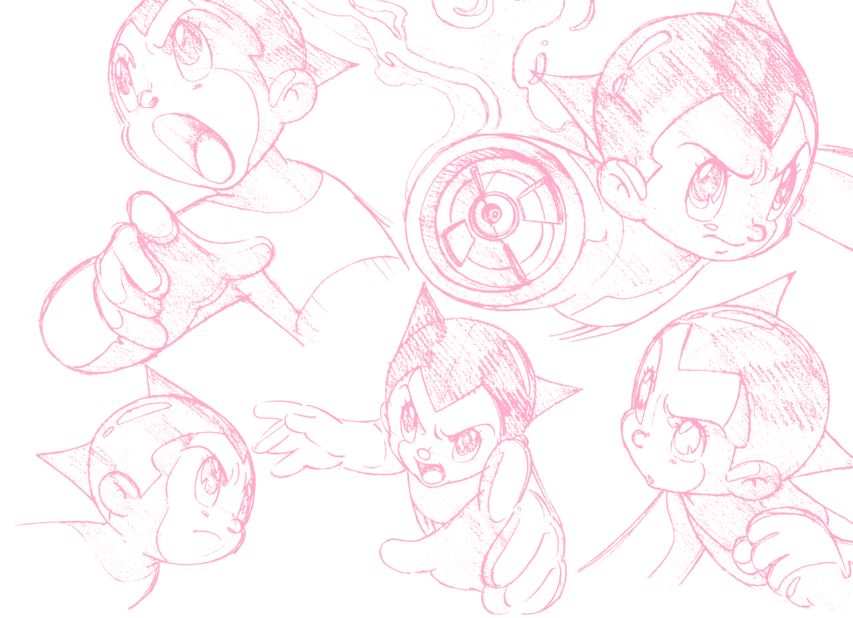
Shaping the Future in a Post-War

A booming post-war economy, growing interest in popular culture, and technological advancements all contributed to the significant growth of the Japanese animation industry after World War II. An important turning point was reached in the 1950s when animation started to gain popularity as a form of entertainment. Toei Animation, founded in 1948, was one of the most significant studios during this time. Toei quickly became a powerhouse, producing some of the earliest successful feature-length animated films, such as *Hakujaden, Legend of the White Serpent* (1958), which showcased the potential of Japanese animation on a more global scale. One of the most influential people in the evolution of Japanese animation was Osamu Tezuka, who is often referred to as the "God of Manga." Tezuka's and other pioneers' works, such as those of Yasuo Ōtsuka, started to lay the groundwork for anime as a separate medium in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Tezuka played a significant role in this post-war development with his groundbreaking *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy) television series in 1963. Already a well-known manga (Japanese comic book) artist, Tezuka introduced a new animation style with big, expressive eyes and simplified character designs that streamlined the production process and reduced costs. The popularity and success of *Astro Boy* helped create the foundation for the modern anime industry and inspired a generation of animators, which in turn led to the explosion of anime on television.

Key pioneers like Eiichi Yamamoto and other significant studios, like Mushi Production (Tezuka's own studio), continued to push the boundaries of anime in both artistic and commercial terms, setting the stage for anime's global expansion in the following decades.

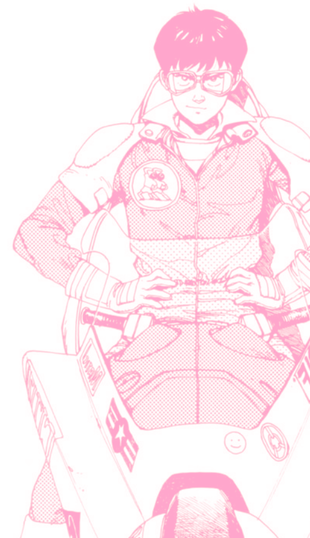
GOLDEN AGE



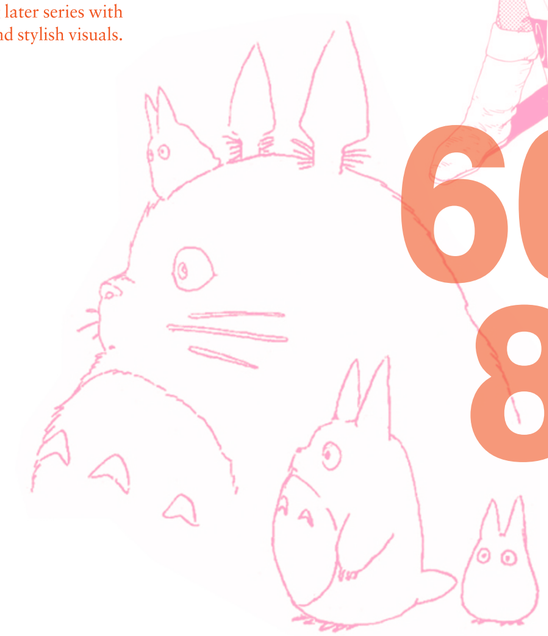
The 1960s through 1980s (often referred to as the "Golden Age" of anime), were an important time that cemented anime's position as a major cultural influence on a worldwide scale. During this period, memorable series and movies were being produced, defining the genre and introducing fresh visual aesthetics and narrative approaches that would influence anime for years to come.

Astro Boy's immense success in 1963—the first anime TV series to be serialized—marked the 1960s and transformed the animation business. *Astro Boy* introduced dynamic action scenes, streamlined animation techniques, and emotional storytelling, which set a precedent for future anime series.

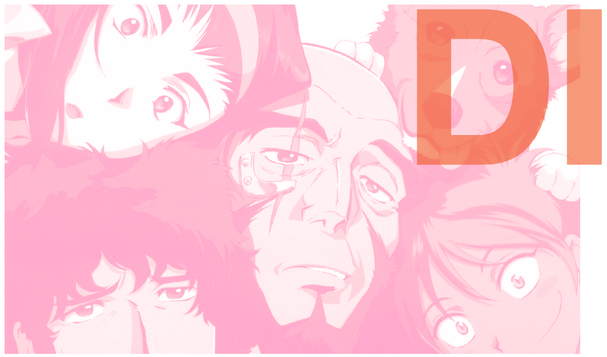
Yoshiyuki Tomino's *Kidō Senshi Gandamu* (Mobile Suit Gundam, 1979), which combined realistic robot combat, political themes, and complex characters, revolutionized the mecha genre in the 1970s. *Rupan Sansei* (Lupin the Third, 1971) also rose to fame during this time, influencing later series with its unique mix of humor, action, and stylish visuals.



60s-80s

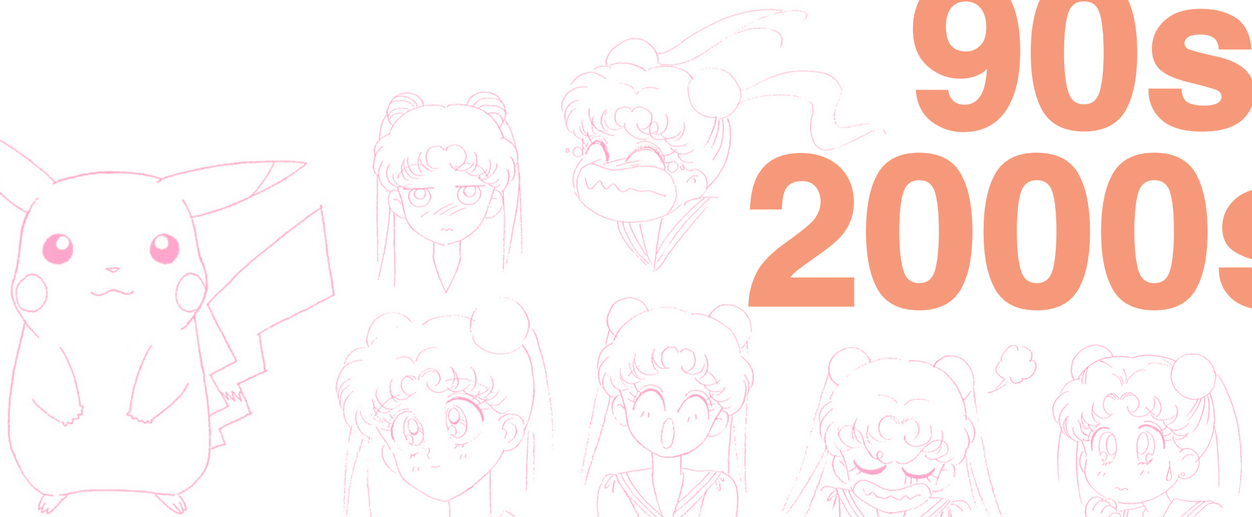


The 1980s witnessed the rise of feature-length anime films, with *Akira* (1988) by Katsuhiro Otomo becoming an iconic masterpiece. *Akira* pushed the boundaries of animation with its daring animation, cyberpunk style, and mature narrative, impacting not only anime but also popular culture worldwide. Some of the most recognizable and well-liked Japanese animated films ever were made by Studio Ghibli (founded in 1985). In addition to captivating audiences, movies like *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) contributed to the development of anime as an adaptable and diverse medium that could explore a variety of themes such as environmentalism, war, and family. Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball Z* premiered in 1989, going on to become one of the most popular anime series of all time.



DIGITAL SHIFT

Mainly attributed to the growth of digital platforms and changing viewer preferences, anime design, and its cultural impact have changed considerably since the 2010s. Because anime is now more widely available to viewers worldwide thanks to streaming services like Netflix, Crunchyroll, and Prime Video, the fan base has grown to be diverse and international, demanding a wider variety of genres and visual styles. Because of this accessibility, genres like slice of life (everyday experiences) and isekai (a character who is transported to or reincarnated in a fantasy world) have become increasingly popular in recent years. Isekai, combining fantasy and adventure, became extremely popular thanks to shows like *Sword Art Online* (2012) and *Re:Zero* (2016). On the other hand, the slice of life genre is demonstrated gorgeously by shows that focus on character development and emotional depth, such as *Your Lie in April* (2014) and *Violet Evergarden* (2018). By blending Japanese aesthetics with novel digital platforms, anime has established itself as a powerful force in visual culture, becoming increasingly recognizable around the world.



90s-2000s

Rapid globalization and the arrival of digital technologies during the 1990s and 2000s marked a turning point in the development of both Japanese design and anime. Anime spread far beyond Japan's boundaries, impacting entertainment and design aesthetics globally as the internet connected markets around the world. Anime styles and narratives became more diversified during this time, with shows like *Sailor Moon* (1992), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), and *Pokémon* (1997) becoming immensely popular abroad. In addition to introducing unique artistic styles and stories, these series became worldwide cultural icons that influenced everything from video games to merchandise.

The late 1990s saw the evolution of digital animation technology, which further transformed the anime industry by enabling more complex and fluid visual effects (with production processes also becoming quicker). In the 2000s, studios replaced cels altogether with digital colors. In this method, after each frame is drawn it is scanned into a computer, then colored and composited digitally instead of being transferred to a cel and colored and composited by hand. Graphic design was also impacted by the growing use of digital tools on the computer, which led to cleaner, more polished images in both anime and broader Japanese media. Anime, whose vibrant colors and exaggerated facial expressions struck a chord with audiences and became mainstays of popular culture worldwide, gave rise to a wave of new designs during this time.

Alongside this, the rise of anime as a style led to a higher integration of Japanese aesthetics into global design practices. The use of anime-inspired motifs in clothing, advertisements, and product packaging was one example of this, establishing anime as a major cultural export that changed people's perceptions of design internationally.

NEW HORIZONS

2010s-present

～未知からやってくる3つの夢幻世界～

KATSUHIRO OTOMO

MEMORIES

メモリーズ

大友克洋

原作・脚本／プロデューサー／杉田 敦　脚島文雄　水尾芳正　田中栄子　井上博明

制作協賛　社講談社　アニメーション制作／マッドハウス　スタジオ4℃

Animation by Czech Philharmonic Orchestra　原作／大友克洋　脚本／今

監督／小関雄大、山川 晃　撮影監督／竹光弘明

キャラクターデザイン・作画監督／川崎博嗣　美術監督／幸田道也　撮影

監督・キャラクター原案／大友克洋　キャラクターデザイン・作

音響監督／吉野貞彦

音楽制作・オリジナルサウンドトラック／ビクターエンタテインメント

芸術文化振興基金助成作品

SHORT PEACE

ショート・ピース

「AKIRA」から7年―新しいOTOMOゾーンの扉が開く！

AKIRA

OTOMO KATSUHIRO

1

KODANSHA

SPECIAL PRICE

1000yen

AKIRA

Based on the feature graphic novel "AKIRA" by KATSUHIRO OTOMO

Produced by RYOHEI SUZUKI & SHUNZO KATO/Directed by KATSUHIRO OTOMO/Screenplayed by IZO HASHIMOTO & KATSUHIRO OTOMO/Chief animator: TAKASHI NAKAMURA/Art director: TOSHIHARU MIZUTANI/Director of photography: KATSUJI MISAWA/Sound director: SUSUMU AKETAGAWA/Musical director & composer: SHOJI YAMASHIRO Sound recording director: TETSUO SEGAWA/Sound effect supervisor: SHIZUO KURAHASHI/Editor: TAKESHI SEYAMA Assistant of chief animator: Koji Morimoto/Animation directors: Yoshio Takeuchi & Hiroaki Sato/Assistant producer: Yoshimasa Mizuo/Production co-ordinator: Ken Tsunoda/Unit production management: Youichi Ikeda & Takahisa Yokomizo

CHARACTERS & CAST　Kaneda by MITSUO IWATA/Tetsuo by NOZOMU SASAKI/Kay by MAMI KOYAMA/Colonel by TARO ISHIDA/Ryu by TETSUSHO GENDA/Doctor by MIZUHO SUZUKI

Presented by AKIRA COMMITTEE　Dolby Surround Stereo●Color●124 Minutes

武器よさらば

大友克洋

少年は【未来】を発明する。

友克洋 監督作

atré

My Favorite Town. Kichijoji

Katsuhiro Otomo × atré

Miraitowa
Ryo Taniguchi, 2017

Someity
Ryo Taniguchi, 2017

This can be seen in anime increasingly infiltrating real-world design and branding. The Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics' mascots, Miraitowa and Someity, were created in an iconic, colorful anime style to represent Japan's modern, youthful culture. Their broad popularity proved the potential of anime aesthetics for international branding and public events. For their 2025 Jubilee, the Catholic Church also unveiled a mascot named Luce, which was inspired by anime to appeal to younger audiences. Brands targeting younger, more pop-culture-savvy audiences—such as tech companies, fashion labels, and even food brands—frequently collaborate with anime artists to create limited-edition merchandise and campaigns that resonate with fans worldwide. This demonstrates how anime is increasingly being used for global projects and to reach audiences of all ages. The end product is a visual language that combines conventional design sensibilities with the playful, creative energy of anime culture.

Beyond the Screen

With its unique aesthetics influencing many creative industries, anime has had a significant impact on modern design. Anime contains many visual elements that are often incorporated into fashion, graphic, and product design. These elements include dynamic line work, exaggerated proportions, and bold color schemes. Similar to anime's dramatic storytelling, these visual styles are frequently employed to evoke a feeling of energy and emotional intensity. Because of this, anime's expressive character designs are frequently used in branding, advertising, and graphic design.

Luce
Simone Legno, 2024

Designing with Anime

Takashi Murakami is one of the most significant modern artists whose work has a strong anime aesthetic influence. Known for his colorful, whimsical artwork and "Superflat" style, Murakami has skillfully combined aspects of anime with fine art and commercial design. His recognizable distorted characters, bright color palette, and smiling flowers are evocative of the exaggerated, vibrant images of anime. By addressing themes of consumerism, popular culture, and Japan's postmodern identity through anime-inspired motifs, Murakami's artwork frequently blurs the boundaries between high and low culture (high is having appeal to a smaller, often upper-class part of society, with low considered as widely appealing to the masses). Anime has become a global visual language as a result of his partnerships with companies like Louis Vuitton and his exhibitions around the world, which have had a significant influence on graphic design and contemporary art.

Another important figure whose work highlights the realms of anime and graphic design is *Akira*'s creator, Katsuhiro Otomo. The cyberpunk genre was redefined by *Akira*'s innovative manga and animation, which also had an impact on visual aesthetics in other media. Otomo's use of dynamic action scenes, futuristic settings, and fine detail has had a direct influence on modern graphic design, especially in the fields of advertising and digital media. His ability to blend the visual impact required for modern branding and media with the narrative depth of anime has inspired graphic designers all over the world. Both artists have solidified anime's impact on the world of design by influencing the use of anime aesthetics in upscale commercial design.

Eye Love Superflat
Takashi Murakami, 2003

Flower Ball
Takashi Murakami, 2002

Supreme Skate Decks
Takashi Murakami, 2007

Murakami's Superflat

Founded by Takashi Murakami, Superflat is a postmodern art movement that took the world by storm. The Superflat movement has emerged as a defining force at the intersection of modern design and anime aesthetics. The vivid colors, cartoonish imagery, and flat, two-dimensional compositions that define Murakami's work are all strongly influenced by anime and otaku subculture. His fusion of pop culture, anime, and fine art is best demonstrated by pieces like *Eye Love Superflat* (2003), *Flower Ball* (2002), and his partnership with Supreme on a series of skate decks in 2007. *Eye Love Superflat* stemmed from a collaboration between Murakami and Louis Vuitton and is a work of art that blurs the lines between fine art and commercial culture. With its psychedelic hues and cartoonish, smiling flowers, the *Flower Ball* sculpture (in Murakami fashion) combines themes of consumerism with the vivid color scheme of anime. These pieces show anime's widespread appeal as an aesthetic, transforming it from its origins in entertainment to a significant element of modern art and corporate branding. His work on the *Supreme Skate Decks* and his partnerships with Louis Vuitton and other luxury brands have shown how anime-inspired aesthetics have crossed conventional lines to impact high-end design, fashion, and advertising.

CANON T-70 Ad
Katsuhiro Otomo, 1984

Otomo's Legacy

Best known for his creative work *Akira*, Katsuhiro Otomo has also made important contributions to the illustration and graphic design field. Over the course of his lengthy career, Otomo has produced numerous event and advertising posters in addition to promotional posters for his manga and film works. A notable commercial design was for the 1984 Canon T-70 advertising campaign, in which Otomo's unique aesthetic—distinguished by strong lines and detailed illustrations—was used on the camera's promotional materials. His character, background, and typographical designs for the campaign integrated his distinct visual style, which combines futuristic themes with intricate detail while capturing the energy and precision associated with the camera.

Angoulême Visual Key
Katsuhiro Otomo, 2016

After receiving the Grand Prix (a lifetime achievement award), Otomo was chosen to create the graphic key for the esteemed Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2016. Combining his trademark style of dense, layered imagery with a sense of movement and narrative depth, his eye-catching and intricate illustration for the occasion captured the essence of the festival's celebration of comics. These works display how Otomo's visual style has influenced advertising and global design culture beyond animation and manga, establishing his skill at merging anime aesthetics with commercial design.

"We want to see the newest things. That is because we want to see the future, even if only momentarily. It is the moment in which, even if we don't completely understand what we have glimpsed, we are nonetheless touched by it. This is what we have come to call art."
– Takashi Murakami

The Final Wave

The important relationship between anime and design is made clear in how anime's unique aesthetics have influenced various design industries in Japan and around the world. From its origins in traditional Japanese art forms like calligraphy and ukiyo-e to its modern expression in colorful animation and design, anime has grown to become a major cultural influence on a global scale. This reach is noticeable in a variety of design fields such as branding, fashion, advertising, and graphic design, helping to create a hybrid aesthetic that combines elements of the past and present.

By using anime-inspired imagery to subvert traditional divisions between high and low culture, fine art, and commercial design, figures such as Takashi Murakami and Katsuhiro Otomo have played a significant role in solidifying anime's place in the larger design community. Anime's enduring appeal, supported by digital platforms and a wide-ranging global fan base, guarantees that its influence will only grow in the years to come.

As digital technologies continue to change creative practices, the relationship between anime and design is expected to evolve even more in the future. As anime's global influence expands, it will undoubtedly inspire new trends in design, paving the way for even more creative collaborations and aesthetics in both Japan and the international design community.